

Notes for narrative-visual atlas project

<p>iii.</p> <p>The cartographer says no – What I do is science. I show the earth as it is, without bias. I never fall in love. I never get involved with the muddy affairs of land. Too much passion unsteadies the hand. I aim to show the full of a place in just a glance.</p> <p>iv.</p> <p>The rastaman thinks, draw me a map of what you see then I will draw a map of what you never see and guess me whose map will be bigger than whose? Guess me whose map will tell the larger truth?</p>
Kei Miller, extract from <i>The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion</i>

In Interdisciplinary Design and Presentation we are working on the assumption that it is possible to create meaning in more ways than only argument: a particular sensibility emerges when, for instance, a drawing with a certain mood is combined with a paragraph of theory that is used in a poetic way, alongside an anecdote of an experience, a news article of an event in a site, a satellite photograph of the area, a photograph of a detail of the site, and a plan of a past building. This is a two part project that makes one product. This project will rely on you to do your own research regarding your site, and should be heavily influenced by the theoretical, contextual and material investigations for your electives.

An atlas is a bound book of maps, tables and charts that can have supplementary illustrations, descriptions, and graphic analysis, and which systematically illustrates a particular subject. A collection of maps of the world, or a region in the world, for instance, would form an atlas. The practice of conceiving and producing maps is known as cartography. The purpose of the cartographer is to produce, through the map, an accurate representation of an aspect of the world. Map making entails gathering information, evaluating the information, and processing it through a graphic media.

Humanity and cartography have a close relationship. Maps are sense making tools and they help us interpret and interact with relationships of things. While maps always cancel out information, they remain useful for a wide range of activities. This is because they express a positionality in the world through a visualised symbolic relationship between elements of a space. Maps are generally made for the reader to see and understand his/her place as a human in relation to an aspect of the world.

There are two basic components to a geographic map: the face of the map and the marginalia. The face of the map is the map image itself. The marginalia, however, makes it possible to accurately read the map image, because it provides further information for the context. The further information could be grids, legends, locations, orientation, production information, projection, scale, and title. Together, the face of the map and the marginalia, provide the reader with the information necessary to orient themselves.

Maps are seemingly objective because they are so useful for orientating us in a place. So much of what we experience and believe in our world around us cannot be seen or exactly explicated. Institutions of the city that make maps on aspects of the city, however, can be blind to these ephemeral aspects to a city. It is important to note, therefore, that the cartographer can zone out the multiplicity of lived lives. This could happen because of the cartographer's interest in the objective and the rational, and his/her use of diagrams,

maps, flow charts, plans. The cartographer, who looks at the world through an objective and rational lens, can miss things that are more ephemeral or may be invisible, yet are no less true to a place.

- What if, however, a map could stake a claim for the things that may be ephemeral to a space, but that still constitutes life?
- What would happen if the cartographer followed the route plotted by the two characters by Kei Miller (2014) in his poem *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion*?
- What if the cartographer learns from the rastaman, and is able to map in a more poetic sense?

To look at a map is to look at the world through a fictionalised lens. Denis Wood (2010) argues in *Everything Sings: Maps for a Narrative Atlas*, that maps are texts, and that they constitute relationships of signs and symbols within a meaning making system that is similar to those employed by paintings, and novels and poems. The choices and chance occurrences that happen during the mediation process of making a map present a range of understandings, judgements, and feelings about a place. Wood's cartographer, therefore, can potentially also be Miller's rastaman. But only if he/she is open to the ambiguity, multiplicity and at times, invisibility of relationships that constitutes places. A map, therefore, can be about something personal and subjective: something more human centric than the geographic.

A map, in its broadest sense, is an agglomeration of material practices and representations of a particular time, place, and life. Another thing to consider, therefore, is the form and medium of a map. While map making is generally understood in terms of image making and geography, maps can represent any space, real or imagined. Mapping is often a drawn process, but it can also be a written process, a photograph, a piece of narrative or theoretical writing, a performative process, or even a purely cognitive one. The hand drawn map can intersect with writing, depiction, photographic documentation, news sources, theory, and fiction to create a sense of place that would otherwise remain out of research.

In a series of work named *Atlas*, for instance, the artist Gerard Richter approaches mapping in terms of a collection of photographs, sketches, newspaper clippings and titles. Richter has been assembling these fragments of the world since the mid 1960's, and he arranges the materials on loose sheets of paper. Richter's *Atlas Project* is as much source material for paintings as a continuously growing work.

A map which empathises with the unseen in a space can assist architectural design by remaining open to the complexity of people in their relationship to place. Making maps, and contesting the seemingly objective nature of maps, is a way to declare a distinctive urban experience as a spatial practitioner in Johannesburg. A map, in its broader sense, can take other forms than those of topographic representations of place, it can enable you to plot out your interest as an architect in a wide variety of fields.

Here are some questions to consider while making your maps:

- What if the face of the map is a drawn image that conveys mood rather than position?
- What if the marginalia of the map is a series of narratives or pictures that represent a space, or an idea of a space?
- What if our map-making consciously entails looking at and shaping beliefs, ideas, thoughts, memories, emotions and judgements related to a place?
- What if a map does not focus on the exact geographic relationships that compose a place, but rather on relaying a sense of that place?
- What if the cartographer starts approaching a map in a more poetic form, in the way of a rastaman?
- What if our aim is to tell stories through our maps?
- What if our maps do not try to pin relationships down, but rather, open up them up through new associations?
- What if maps do not flatten spaces, but make them more complex?
- What if a map is a living, breathing, dimensional expression of the human spirit?

Reading list

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Gerard Richter, 1960 – 2017, *Atlas*. Site: <https://www.gerhard-richter.com/en/art/atlas>